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On methodology

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On methodology

Any scientific work will use a methodology. The methodology is sometimes implicit and it is often in accordance with what the reader will normally expect and accept in the scientific domain in question. In mass media research there is a wide spectrum of such more or less established *mainstream* ‘schools’.

When as researchers we get involved in *content analysis*, we will also have a large number of methods to choose between. We might want to stay at a relative distance from the actual content, and select a *quantitative* method, e.g. counting and measuring the occurrence of pre-defined themes in a large and systematic sample of texts. The result is a seemingly objective description of the structure of texts, from which one can make generalising statements about other similar texts in a similar cultural setting and epoch.

If we are more interested in analysing the qualitative aspects of texts it is necessary to go beyond their surface and look into the texts themselves. Also in this scenario the researcher will have a wide range of possible *qualitative methods*, as *argumentation analysis* or a variant of *discourse analysis*.

Our intentions with the study of the Berríos case could not be fulfilled by a *textual* analysis only. As stated in the title of this book, we have wanted to investigate and demonstrate not only the *quality of the media coverage* of the Berríos case, but also the possible *misinformation* and *manipulation* that has taken place. This has made it necessary to combine a variety of approaches, from both journalism and communication research and from political science.

We have gone *beyond the texts* themselves, and have looked into the sources that the journalists had at their direct disposal at the time of writing. This was done in order to investigate the *professionalism* (or lack of it) among contemporary journalists in Uruguay, and to demonstrate what journalists could have done with the facts that actually were available.

The (low) degree of professionalism which the media have demonstrated in the Berríos case can to some extent be explained by the level of professional training of journalists in Uruguay, to another extent by the editorial decisions that have been deliberately made *not to publish in order not to disturb* the political system – in Uruguay and in the relations to Chile.

To understand the full process of the journalism connected with the Berríos case, however, it was therefore necessary also to go *beyond the media* themselves. The Berríos case clearly illustrates the thesis put forth by the German sociologist Oskar Negt almost 30 years ago: “The centre of mass media lies outside of the media themselves.” (Negt 1974) When we do seek to find out and understand the relation between reality and the corresponding narrative on this reality we are thus confronted with a number of relations between actors among:

- general public
- parties (affected individuals)
- journalists
- editors
- owners
- political system
- government
- state institutions

These actors enter into a large number of relations, as in a matrix:

	Public	Parties	Journalists	Editors	Owners	Political system	Government
Parties	○						
Journalists	●	●					
Editors	●	●	○				
Owners	○	○	○	○			
Political system	○	●	●	●	○		
Government	○	●	●	●	○	●	
State institutions	○	●	●	●	○	●	●

Table 1: Possible relations between actors. Studied relations are marked '●' in the matrix, omitted relations are marked '○'.

In this book we have looked into several of these relations, but certainly not all. We have thus not studied the relations between owners, editors and journalists in the newspapers. Also, we have generally not made any separation between editors and journalists. This would be necessary in a 'gate-keeper' model study which concentrated on the filtering of news *within* the media organisation. However, the main focus of our study has not been to explain the micro-level, internal workings of newspapers, but rather to expose the relations between the *newspaper content* on the one hand, and the *external powers* on the other hand, concentrating on government and state institutions.

One way of doing this, as demonstrated at large in this book, is to *reconstruct* what actually happened. In this process, to the extent that it can be done, it becomes evident both what the journalists and editors decided to make known to the public, what they did or could have known but decided not to publish – i.e. the filtering of news from the reality of journalists to the representation. The gaps demonstrate the journalists' role in producing *bad information* and *disinformation* of the public in the Berríos case.

In addition, and perhaps most important we have attempted to establish the relation between actual ‘reality and the corresponding narrative on this reality’, i.e. the level of truth in the stories made public by the newspapers studied. It is only through such research that it is possible to document to what extent and which *manipulation* has taken place.

Manipulation of news is an *intended distortion* of content. We document many instances of such manipulation, but it is sometimes not possible to find evidence for which individual actors were *guilty* of each specific act of manipulation. Perhaps it is not even very interesting, as it seems clear that different circles in the combined system of state institutions and political power have had either explicit or informal consensus on what to do: disclose as little as possible or, if necessary, lie.

This is not to say that the establishment press is always lying. On the contrary, it has done its share of ‘muckraking’ much as cited by Klaehn:

“There are a surprising number of higher up editors and producers who know they must accommodate the interests of ownership and other powers /.../ but within these constrictions, are still committed to as much muckraising as possible.” (Klaehn 2002: 151)

Our over all impression of the press is then that it has partly done its work, but that the general quality of this work is of relatively low quality. It is especially so because the establishment press has failed even to attempt to break out of the constrictions experienced or imposed from the state and political establishment.

Therefore the so-called *propaganda model* elaborated by Herman and Chomsky (Herman and Chomsky 1988) seems to be a most relevant model for understanding the press coverage in the Berríos case. Using the propaganda model we can arrive at an institutional critique of media performance, although

we do not study e.g. gate-keeping among editors and journalists. Nor do we account for any effects of the information on the audience – this has simply not been within the scope of our study. We can acknowledge that a micro-level audience analysis also in this case could have provided some useful insights, but there are other and more important issues at stake here:

“In this context, could anything be more perverse politically and intellectually than a retreat to micro-analysis, the celebration of minor individual triumphs, and reliance on solutions based on individual actions alone?” (Herman 1996: 16)

In our choice of what media to analyse, we have limited our scope to a few important newspapers. We have thus chosen not to make any distinction between what Herman and Chomsky would have called the *elite media* and the ‘*quality press*’. It seems to us, that the press in Uruguay does not really lend itself to such granularity. Also, the ‘quality’ prefix might cause unintended understandings, even if the label ‘quality press’ is certainly no quality stamp. Instead, the category is reserved for a higher level populist press, while the *elite press* category is used for the very few, as *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (Chomsky 1987: 135). Certainly no newspaper in today’s Uruguay would qualify here.

Instead, in the case of Uruguay, we combine these categories (elite media and quality press) into one: the *establishment press*. At several occasions we do refer to papers outside of this category, notably *Brecha*. In Chomsky’s terminology, *Brecha* would be regarded as an example of *independent media*, rather than the commonly used and slightly demeaning ‘alternative media’. (Chomsky 1992: 380)

It is an established democratic ideal that media are independent and that they are dedicated to seeking and reporting the truth. They should not just reflect the world as the establishment wants it to be viewed.

“If /.../ the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to ‘manage’ public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality”. (Herman and Chomsky 1988: xi)

This is why we have gone quite into detail not only when analysing and reconstructing what the establishment press did publish, but into what actually happened *in reality*, both with respect to what information was available at the time of publication, information which became available later and was often ignored, *and* information which could have been extracted from actors in the Berríos case – if the press had done its work in an ideal world.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the size of the gap between reality and the journalistic representation of this reality is an indicator of the *degree of professionalism* in the press. It also indicates the *power of constraints* that determine how much muckraking the press can do.

There are multiple constraints to the work of journalists. We have already mentioned the degree of professionalism as one. Professionalism is certainly dependent on professional education, but it is itself also dependent on such ‘filter’ elements or mechanisms that govern the establishment press in general. Herman and Chomsky (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 1-35; Chomsky 1998: 41).

The five filter elements are:

1. Size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, profit orientation.
2. Advertising as the primary income source.
3. Reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power.

4. 'Flak' as a means of disciplining the media.
5. 'Otherness' (e.g. anti-communism, racism or chauvinism).

In the Berríos case study we have concentrated our attention to the third of these filters. Political, economic or administrative elites usually facilitate the work of journalists by ready-made materials, press conferences, copies of documents etc. In this way government sources (e.g.) become attractive if only for economic reasons. Their services make it cheaper to run a news organisation. In a less professional environment such sources thus become both valued and routinely accepted as credible. This contributes both to a 'symbiotic' relationship between journalists and their sources and to a reciprocity of interests.

The effects on journalism of the relations between journalists and sources are at least two-fold:

1. Media feel obliged to bring dubious stories and restrict criticism or research in order not to disturb the relationship.
2. Critical sources are avoided because of lesser availability, more work, greater costs – and in order not to offend primary sources.

It is of course very difficult to document these mechanisms, as any explicit disclosure would hurt the source. The coverage of the Berríos case, however, cannot be well understood without their existence.

The propaganda model thus predicts a number of characteristics of establishment media coverage. Of special interest here is that it also predicts that victims of state-sponsored terrorism and violence that is initiated by democracies and their allies will tend to serve the 'good' elites and as a consequence 'unworthy victims' will "merit only slight detail, minimal

humanization, and little context that will excite and enrage” (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 35). Berríos certainly was an ‘unworthy victim’.

There are two main methodological approaches to test the propaganda model. One is to study ‘paired examples’ of events during the same period of time. This approach is naturally not applicable in a one-case study, as this.

The other approach (favoured also by Chomsky in many of his writings (see Chomsky 1989: 59)) is to investigate the range of permitted opinion on chosen topics. This entails the necessity to scrutinize media content, sources, framing and representation in news discourse – often including the observation of the *absence* of historical context. This is the approach applied in the present study.

It is common in academic texts to abstain from polemical comments, or at least clearly to separate polemical from analytical parts of the text. We have chosen not to make such a separation – as it happens quite in line with our main methodological sources. We too prefer not to pretend an emotional neutrality when that would be false, nor to postpone or separate partial conclusions from their immediate context.

The propaganda model has been criticised for being conspiratorial (see e.g. Rai 1995: 15), as if it assumed that powerful representatives of the state, political system and the media were actually agreeing upon which course to take, in general or in specific cases (e.g. the Berríos case). This is definitely *not our view*, and it is not implied by the propaganda model. This does of course not exclude the possibility of conspiracy – and we do know that real ‘opinion engineering’ frequently does take place in both democratic and undemocratic societies.

Until now we have – in this chapter – mainly been concerned with the propaganda model’s ‘first order’ predictions of media content. These are concerned with the observable patterns of media behaviour.

There are also predictions to be made at second and third order levels. The second-order prediction is that analyses which support the correctness of the propaganda model will tend to be excluded from intellectual debate on media discourse and media behaviour. In view of the absence of debate on the media coverage of the Berríos case, it is tempting to conclude that there is evidence in this direction. But perhaps it remains to be seen – until the reaction to the present analysis has shown.

The third-order prediction of the propaganda model is that intellectual and academic analyses and studies will be bitterly condemned, however well grounded in logical argument and supporting evidence. We do of course regard the present study as well argued and supported by ample evidence. And we do hope that readers will not only condemn by default, but that many will also read the arguments, evaluate evidence and draw their own conclusions. If they do, we might have made a small contribution to a much needed development, so that:

“... citizens of the democratic capitalist societies should undertake a course of intellectual self-defence to protect themselves from manipulation and mind-control”. (Chomsky 1989: vii)

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